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‘Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold’ Review: Creativity That Cuts Against the Grain

Fontana came to painting late in life, but his slashed canvases were a radical attempt to explore a new kind of space.

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Lucio Fontana's 'Spatial Concept, Expectations' (1959) PHOTO: FONDAZIONE LUCIO FONTANA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SIAE, ROME

Radical gestures have been a staple of modern art—particularly European modern art—at least since 1913, when, as Marcel Duchamp recounted, “I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.” Over the past century, we’ve had, in addition to countless enigmatic works of performance art, Man Ray wrapping a sewing machine in an army blanket in 1920 and calling it “The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse,” Salvador Dalí turning a lobster into the receiver on an old-fashioned telephone (1936), Niki de Saint Phalle shooting a rifle at paint bags (1961), and Yves Klein making a “fire painting” with a big blowtorch in 1962. Americans, to be sure, have added to the list with the likes of Robert Rauschenberg’s “Erased De Kooning Drawing” (1953) and Robert Morris’s riding horses back and forth to gouge a line in a ranch’s turf in 1969.

In 1958, the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) made what the Metropolitan Museum of Art calls “one of the most extraordinary, radical gestures in modern art.” He cut a vertical slash in the canvas of his own monochrome painting. Fontana had previously touted something called “Spatialism,” in which he made paintings with holes in them that he claimed

embodied a fourth dimension of “nothingness, or the beginning of everything.” For the next decade, until his death, Fontana devoted himself to the “Cuts,” his most iconic works of art.

“Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold,” at the Met Breuer and the museum’s nearby main Fifth Avenue location through April 14, is a retrospective exhibition—the first in the U.S. in 40 years—of about 100 objects covering the years 1931 to 1968 that seems a little smaller than that. Perhaps this owes to Fontana’s big breakthrough not being, in hindsight, quite that earthshaking. His oeuvre as a whole conveys a sense of *voilà!*—elegant, to be sure, but on a parlor-room scale that we Americans—used to bigger, more rough-and-tumble artistic innovations—can’t help but find a mite precious and tasteful. These days, it appears radical only in the same vein as one of those push-the-envelope runway fashion shows in Milan.



Lucio Fontana's 'Spatial Concept, New York 10' (1962) PHOTO: FONDAZIONE LUCIO FONTANA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SIAE, ROME

Fontana’s father ran a commercial sculpture business producing works for Buenos Aires cemeteries where many Italian immigrants were buried. His son, trained to be a sculptor, ventured into ceramics, where his adroitly expressive work sold rather well. (Fontana remarked, in a nice turn of phrase, that his ceramic sculpture looked “earthquaked but motionless.”) He didn’t touch a canvas until he was past 50, and as a teacher in an Argentine art school was well ahead of his time in urging his students to forsake painting in favor of working in projected electric light. In 1946 he co-wrote the “White Manifesto” about Spatialism, and in 1949 produced his first perforated paintings—surfaces of white paint with what looks like a lot of little bullet holes in them.

In the “Cuts,” Fontana would take a Stanley knife (essentially, a razor blade with a handle) and slash an evenly painted canvas while it was still wet. The slashes are usually vertical and also slightly curved, as is apt to happen when an artist makes this kind of gesture without the guidance of a straightedge. The slashes were, of course, a one-shot deal. “They think it’s easy to make a cut or a hole. But it’s not true,” Fontana said. “You have no idea how much stuff I throw away.” The cuts in the paintings not trashed received a stabilizing piece of black gauze on the verso side.



Lucio Fontana's 'Spatial Concept, Nature' (1959-60) PHOTO: FONDAZIONE LUCIO FONTANA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SIAE, ROME

If you've seen one of Fontana's "Cuts," you haven't—to counter the cliché—seen them all. They vary in format (not all are rectangles), color, and number of slashes; each has an ineffable individual character, and none look at all like the product—to address the doubt that might lurk in the mind of many a Metropolitan visitor—of a guy with a gimmick who was just cranking them out. Fontana was philosophical and dead serious.

In the half-century since Fontana slashed his paintings, any number of artists have followed his lead in deconstructing that old standby art object, the painting made on a piece of canvas stretched over a rectangular frame. They've added extra layers of canvas, attached objects (even neon tubing), carved notches, punched holes, and reduced their pictures to veritable tatters. Some artists have even removed the cloth from its supporting lumber and folded, piled, or shredded it. The disruptions are legion and too numerous to list here, but you see examples every day in serious galleries in prestigious art neighborhoods.



Lucio Fontana's 'Spatial Concept, The Quanta' (1959) PHOTO: FONDAZIONE LUCIO FONTANA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SIAE, ROME

Few American artists similarly inclined would likely mention Fontana as a source or inspiration. Those who do know his work would probably dismiss it as too Continental—in the way that berets or Gauloise cigarettes are. Those who aren't familiar with his work, however, might find the Met's show a minor revelation. In our current climate of huge retrospectives of known and over-known quantities (such as Andy Warhol), however, "On the Threshold" is a necessary—and for those who look closely, rewarding—addendum.